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My name is Richard Wakefield, and I was born on June 7th, 1945. For a significant part of my youth, from 1960 to 1972 (with a period of National Service from 1965–1967), I had the distinct privilege of working at what I consider the heart of Australian bookselling: Angus & Robertson's iconic flagship store at 89 Castlereagh Street in Sydney. I was just 15 when I started, stepping into a world that, looking back, feels almost mythical.

This early immersion in the world of books was a natural extension of my upbringing. Having lost my mother at the tender age of 28 to a brain tumor unseen by doctors in the 1950s, I grew incredibly close to my grandfather, Rudolph Blackert. Born in Mudgee to German parents who arrived during the 1800s gold rush – my grandfather was an honorable man who shaped me profoundly. A talented musician, playing the cello, viola, and violin, he introduced me to both classical music and the boundless world of books. His legacy is even preserved in an interview with Australian folklorists John Meredith and Chris Sullivan.

It was in this formative period at A&R that I encountered another honorable man who would become like an older, cherished friend and mentor: Hedley Jefferies. He was so much like my grandfather in his wisdom and kindness, a man I invited to my wedding, a man I

would have written a biography about had I been around in his early days.

Hedley, who passed in 2002 at the age of 74, was, in essence, the soul of Angus & Robertson's. He possessed an encyclopedic knowledge of literature, a passion that was infectious, and a unique, almost revolutionary, approach to connecting readers with the perfect book. He understood that to truly get children into reading, parents often gifted classics, and his advice to me when I first started was simple: "Know the classics."

He was, I believe, the first to create a meticulously maintained customer mailing list that spanned all of Australia. What set him apart, and what few people truly know, is that he read every single book he recommended himself. His integrity was absolute, and he trusted my judgment so completely that if he had too many titles, he'd entrust me, even in my teens, to read them and provide my honest review. This deep respect and shared passion formed the bedrock of our bond.

And here's another 'gem' that speaks to the measure of the man and the extraordinary trust he commanded: his customers, nationwide, held his recommendations in such high esteem that if a book wasn't quite for them, they would never dream of returning it for a refund. Instead, they would quietly pass it on to a family member, rather than risk suggesting to Hedley that his judgment was amiss. That level of respect and unwavering loyalty is almost unimaginable in today's commercial world.

I remember distinctly the excitement when Hedley had me read the first book by a new author named Robert Ludlum, *The Scarlatti Inheritance*. We were “spot on” with that one, and the buzz was immediate – copies just ran out of the shop. Oh, those were the days!

Our world at A&R wasn’t confined to the shop floor. After work on Thursdays and Fridays, the upstairs bar at the Surry Hotel, at the corners of Castlereagh and King Streets, became our unofficial literary club. Booksellers and publishers’ reps would all gather, like a big family, never any trouble, just lively discussions about books and authors. Sometimes, literary giants like Sir Walter Stone and Ion Idriess would join us. We called it “booze and books,” and it was a vibrant, enriching atmosphere. Even Saturdays had their ritual, meeting friends at the York Hotel after 12 pm. Much of this wonderful camaraderie naturally shifted after I got married, but the memories remain vivid.

Today, looking back at the book trade, it’s clear how much has changed, and not always for the better. The shift towards authors who runs what feels like a book factory with co-authors, and the proliferation of “estate hacks” publishing under a famous name with tiny print for the actual writer, deeply frustrates me. It feels like a dilution of genuine authorship and, frankly, pure greed. I often think, how could anyone with integrity recommend some of those books? It’s a far cry from the honest, personal curation that Hedley and I believed in, where every recommendation carried the weight of genuine belief and a deeply read understanding.

The changes brought by Gordon Barton when he acquired Angus & Robertson in the late 1960s were particularly heartbreaking for

Hedley. To see the institution he had dedicated his life to, its unique character and literary soul, streamlined and commercialized, was a profound blow to an honorable man.

I often wonder if I am the last living staff member from that special period at Angus & Robertson's. It's why telling these stories, for my family and for anyone who will listen, feels so important. It's my way of ensuring that the memory of Hedley Jefferies, that remarkable man, and the golden age of a truly great Australian bookstore, lives on for future generations.

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Appendix: Angus & Robertson – A Brief Timeline

This short outline gives the background to the firm I knew so well in the 1960s and early 1970s. It is drawn from the official company record but presented here as a companion to my memories.

1882–1884

George Robertson, a young Scotsman newly arrived in Sydney, begins work in a local bookshop.

David Angus joins him. Two years later, Angus opens his own small store at 110 Market Street.

1886

The partnership of Angus & Robertson is formed. Robertson invests £15 and joins Angus in business.

1895

The firm moves to 89 Castlereagh Street, Sydney — the building that would later become my workplace, once hailed as “the biggest bookshop in the world.”

1900–1933

David Angus retires to England and passes away soon after.

George Robertson continues until his death in 1933, having become one of the great figures of Australian bookselling.

1907

The partnership becomes a public company — Angus & Robertson Ltd.

1938–1951

A publishing office opens in London.

Later, a store is established in the Australian High Commission, serving expatriate readers for twenty years.

1960s–1970s

The golden age remembered in this memoir — the time of Hedley Jefferies, when the Castlereagh Street store was the living heart of Australian literary life.

Late 1960s

Gordon Barton acquires the company, bringing commercial changes that deeply altered its character.

1977–1980

The first A&R franchise opens at Hurstville.

The flagship Pitt Street Mall store begins trading, marking a new retail era.

1990s

Mergers and acquisitions: Bookworld (1990), Whitcoulls (1993), Blue Star Group (1996).

A&R launches its first online bookstore (1995).

2001–2009

Purchased by WH Smith PLC, then Pacific Equity Partners (PEP).

Borders and Whitcoulls merge under the RedGroup Retail umbrella.

2011

RedGroup Retail collapses; most A&R stores close.

The online business continues under Pearson Australia.

2013–2015

Penguin merges with Random House.

Two years later, Penguin Random House sells A&R to Booktopia.

2024

Angus & Robertson becomes part of Booktopia Direct Pty Ltd.

Compiled from the official Angus & Robertson historical record (Booktopia/A&R site, 2024), this timeline accompanies

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by Richard Wakefield